

From micro-situational making of agency to multi-level reflection on social relation and structure: The case of Qing Hong Program after ‘5.12’ earthquake of Sichuan, China

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Abstract

The tension between social workers’ commitment to values and the effectiveness of their interventions has been often observed and has affected the relationship between research and practice. The evidence-based practice model submits practice to strict positivist scrutiny. It suspends or neglects the value laden in the process of experimental intervention, and argues for seeking justified universal rules or causal-effect relations between variables as the guideline to social work intervention. This invokes strong rebuttals from critical reflective practice. Critical reflective practice within the epistemology of interpretivism highlights multi perspectives from different standpoints and tries to substitute universal rules with contextual consensus as the solution to social problems facing social work. This article borrows practice theory from Giddens and Bourdieu and extended case method from Burawoy to elaborate the debate between evidence-based practice and reflective practice. We reconstruct the reflective practice model, and suggest that social work research and practice should be not only mutually dialogued for the transformation of interaction situations, but also extended to macro structural and institutional factors.

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As a helping profession, social work bears the responsibility for enhancing social justice and human well-being (Sewpaul and Jones, 2004). Social work practice, therefore, has moral and political dimensions (Clark, 2006; Hartman, 1993). However, in order to gain societal recognition as a profession, social work must equip itself with scientific theories and effective professional methods (Beddoe, 2011; Kirk and Reid, 2002). This has resulted in an irresolvable tension between tenets of scientific rationality and commitments to moral and political values. In the last two decades, this tension has been transformed into some debates between evidence-based practice and reflective practice in the professions (Gambrill, 2006; Humphries, 2003; Webb, 2001).

Evidence-based practice was originated in medicine (Sackett et al., 1996) and rapidly transferred to social work in the US and UK by scholars such as MacDonald (1998), Gambrill (1999, 2006), Corcoran (2000), Gibbs and Gambrill (2002). Evidence-based practice relies on the positivist research method to corroborate its evidence and commands its professionals to search and evaluate relevant evidence before an intervention according to hierarchical criteria, then to test or justify the validity of the application of relevant knowledge following the intervention. Even though evidence-based practice has taken clients' views and clinical situations into account (Gibbs and Gambrill, 2002), it has been criticized for neglecting the knowledge of the intervention process or simplifying evidence and the decision-making process (Humphries, 2003; Webb, 2001; Witkin and Harrison, 2001).

Reflective practice is another approach which attempts to develop process knowledge of professional practice in uncertain and ambiguous contexts (Dreyfus and Dreyfus, 1986; Eraut, 1994; Fook et al., 2000; Schön, 1983, 1987; Sheppard et al., 2000; Tsang, 2013). Reflective practice contends that the decision-making of professional practice is not following-the-rules behaviour as stressed by evidence-based practice, but a heuristic and intuitive action by the expert practitioner utilizing her or his wisdom. According to their arguments, there are, at least, two reasons for preferring reflective practice to evidence-based practice: the first is the characteristics of social work intervention, which are uncertain and ambiguous; the second is the process of decision-making in the real world, which is context-dependent, applying all kinds of knowledge embodied in heuristic or intuitive thinking and acting of practitioners.

Underlying this debate is a dispute between the different epistemologies of positivism and interpretivism (Humphries, 2003; Sale et al., 2002). On the one hand, positivists simulate natural scientific methods and deductive logic to conduct societal research and draw conclusions in the form of universal laws or rules which

are claimed to be applicable across a range of situations and transcending historical conditions. On the other hand, interpretivists, drawing on the life world by inductive logic, argue for reflexive sense making of everyday life or thick descriptions of cultural phenomena, and draw conclusions as the form of knowledge of storage (Schütz, 1967) or local knowledge (Geertz, 1973). The dispute among epistemological paradigms sparks multi-dimensional discussion on the effectiveness and legitimacy of social work and even results in the postmodern turn in social work (Chambon and Irving, 1994; Parton, 1994; Pease and Fook, 1999). The dispute between evidence-based practice model and reflective practice model with its epistemological difference has some questions to be discussed in more detail, such as the validity and transferability of contextual knowledge, and the type and scope of evidence of professional intervention, etc. Should we be caught in 'either/or' choice between positivist evidence-based practice model and interpretivist reflective practice model? Or should we only adopt the postmodern approach to escape from the 'either/or' choice, which means abolishing fundamental argument, and just be concerned about symbolic construction or hyper-proliferation of symbolic meaning? Are there any different theories and methodologies to denote new ways for jumping from this trap?

In the late 1990s, American sociologist Michael Burawoy (1998) tried to resolve this antagonism between positivism and interpretivism, and proposed the extended case method supported by reflexive science as the integration of science and interpretation. Nonetheless, this effort has not transmitted to social work practice, especially to the debate between evidence-based practice and reflective practice. In addition, the reflective practice approach has borrowed more insights from Donald A. Schön and Paulo Freire, while the conception of practice advanced by Anthony Giddens, Pierre Bourdieu and Alain Touraine have not been stressed enough in social work theories (Gray and Webb, 2009). This article uses the case of a community livelihood rehabilitation program by Qing Hong Social Work Services in Sichuan Province, China, following the earthquake on 12 May 2008 to deepen the discussion of the relationship between reflection and practice from the points of practice theory of Giddens, Bourdieu and Touraine. We try to bring the extended case method to social work and transform it from a qualitative research method to an action guideline for social work intervention.

The evidence and validity of social work practice

With the drive towards scientific rationality and accountability, the social work profession takes the flag of evidence-based practice as its hallmark, so the problem of perspective in social work changes its profile into the form of so-called 'converting information needs related to practice decisions into well-structured answerable questions' (Gambrill, 2006: 340), and can be solved by using the best intervention method supported by the best evidence; however, the key question is whether the problems clients face can be converted into well-structured answerable questions. According to Witkin and Harrison (2001), 'Ideally, best evidence would include

integrating knowledge gained from practice experiences with knowledge gained through research. . . . What remains unclear is the range and type of problems for which the “what works” formulation is helpful’ (p. 294). They also pointed out: ‘we learn to work with moral narrative, the “morass of goods and bads, rights and wrongs, evils and virtues, bearing little resemblance to the diagnostic label or the balance sheet of assets or liabilities that the client inevitably learns” (Goldstein, 2000: 349)’ (p. 294).

Undoubtedly, the emphasis of evidence-based practice on rationality and effectiveness has contributed to the social work profession. Sheppard and his colleagues (2000) stated, ‘To deny potential significance of using rigorous evidence in practice would seem rather absurd’ (p. 467). Nonetheless, evidence-based practice, at the same time, limits its rationality within positivism and prescribes the rational behaviour of professional intervention as a mechanical step-by-step, rule-following behaviour. It proclaims that there are some hierarchical methods for ranking the robustness of research, from the pinnacle of randomized clinical trials to quasi-experiments, and then to single case evaluation design (Gambrill, 2006; Rubin and Babbie, 2011). It is said, only by this way, ‘evidence-based social care is the conscientious, explicit, and judicious use of current best evidence in making decisions regarding the welfare of individuals’ (Sackett et al., 1996: 71). This statement is challenged by Sheppard and his colleagues (2000): ‘what, if we are to be informed by issues of cognitive process, do the terms “conscientious”, “judicious” entail? . . . How are we to decide what is, in fact, the best evidence?’ (p. 467).

When we enter the decision-making process, not all questions can be answered in a specific and simple manner. According to Webb (2001), the cognitive heuristic psychological characteristic of decision making shows that ‘reasoning strategies even in the face of evidence consistently fail to respect the canons of rationality assumed by the evidence-based approach’ (p. 64). He further argues, along with Winch (1976), that actions are commended in and through language, with concepts constituting the beliefs which inform actions. Humphries (2003) takes us from philosophical challenges to methodological challenges. She contends that the evidence-based approach should be widened to include service users’ opinions and that the participatory research method, which attempts to identify the concerns that matter to people and are directly affected by public policies, provides better quality evidence than positivist methods.

When we take service users’ opinions into account, a question emerges: whether all the opinions of service users’ are right and should be equally considered? In the radical tradition, Paulo Freire had been introduced into social work (Leonard, 1975). Freire, like Karl Marx and Jean-Paul Sartre, identifies false consciousness within the oppressed because of the internalized ideology of oppressing people (see Dale, 2003). Freire stresses conscientization as the means of liberation of the oppressed people (Freire, 1973). This conduct resembles the empowerment method of Solomon (1976). Therefore, conscientization and empowerment became popular concepts in radical social work in the 1980s. According to this critical radical tradition, the effect of social work cannot be effected by some specific skills because

conscientization or empowerment is a process of participatory action research. In addition, the measurement of the validity of conscientization or empowerment is different from positivist research methods, such as sample survey or scale test. Except regular means, such as triangulation, construct validity, face validity, conscientization or empowerment, or emancipatory praxis pays attention to the less well-known notion of catalytic validity (Lather, 1991: 69).

However, along with the introduction of postmodernism into social work in the 1990s, empowerment and conscientization concepts are deconstructed from Foucault's perspective of power relation by scholars such as Pease (2002), Healy (1999), Fook (2001, 2002), and Fook and Morley (2005). Schön with his 'reflection in action' comes into the forefront of contextual multi-discourse dialogues among reflective practice advocates. Schön's theory emphasized situation dialogues, developing effective expertise and transferring it to another situation, rather than transforming subjective and power structure, so he is more consistent with the postmodern perspectives.

For improving practitioners' competence and professional effectiveness, Schön (1983) proposes reflective practice as an alternative to technical rational practice, argues that the capacity of professional practice for solving uncertain, complex, and ambiguous problems should be enhanced by reflection in action. Furthermore, through reflection on 'reflection in action', professionals can transfer their frame experiment of a specific situation to other situations, and can learn this capacity by way of supervision, much like looking and reflecting in a hall of mirrors (Schön, 1987).

Schön's theory intends to substitute technical and rational practice by reflective practice. He contends that research and practice should be a collaborative partnership, not an unequal exchange relationship. Reflective research should be based on reflective practice, which included four types of form: frame analysis, repertoire-building research, research on fundamental methods of inquiry and overarching theories, research on the process of reflection-in-action (Schön, 1983: 310–323). Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1986) are more moderate than Schön in suggesting adjustment to the relationship between context-free knowledge and professional expertise. They do not want to substitute universal knowledge developed by positivist methods, they prefer to integrate this so-called context-free knowledge with situation-specific knowledge; however, Dreyfus and Dreyfus overestimate the intuitive capacity of professionals or in term of skills, which gives rise to discontent with Eraut. Eraut (1994) integrates Dreyfus's theory and the thinking of Schön to provide a comprehensive model of developing professional expertise. He thought that professional knowledge and competence should include four kinds of knowledge: propositional knowledge, personal knowledge, process knowledge and moral principles and knowledge. Eraut considers learning and mastering process knowledge as the core of development of professional expertise. He identifies five types of professional practice as process knowledge: (1) processes for acquiring and interpreting information; (2) skilled behaviour; (3) deliberative processes; (4) giving information; and (5) metaprocess. Like Schön's reflection-in-action theory,

Eraut's deliberative processes lie at the heart of professional work (1994: 152). Based on foregoing works, Fook and her colleagues (2000) differentiate between experienced practitioners and expert practitioners:

Expert practitioner must be able to quickly devise new categories of experience, perhaps transferring relevant knowledge from other domains, to be able to perceive and prioritize relevant knowledge and actions. Thus expert practitioner is one whom we would expect can take risks and act beyond the call of duty. It is these procedural or process-oriented skills and values which may in fact differentiate the 'expert' from the merely 'experienced'. (p. 180)

Sheppard et al. (2000) further concentrate on cognitive processes by which understanding is created to demonstrate that the reflective practice process can generate robust knowledge. They associate cognitive process with hypothesis testing. They conclude that cognitive processes comprise of three elements: (1) critical appraisal (focused attention, querying information, evaluating information, and causal inference); (2) hypothesis generation (understanding, others' understanding, intervention, procedure, and whole case hypothesis); and (3) the distinction between speculative hypothesis and those relating to actual experience.

In sum, the reflective practice model extends the scope of evidence of validity of social work practice, and provides an alternative strategy of integrating propositional knowledge with practice, to become an expert practitioner to deliberately process and transfer their expertise from one context to another. Whereas, some problems remain unresolved: What is the difference between habitual behaviours in everyday life and the agent of reflective practice? How can the individual move from being a routinized behaviourist to become a reflective practitioner? How can a practitioner transcend situational constraints to reflect macro institutional and historical factors? We shall present a case to discuss these questions in the rest of this article.

Multi-level reflective dialogues: A case of transformation of professional relationship and status of subject

Our program started in October 2008, and was sponsored by the China Red Cross Foundation for the reconstruction of the disaster zone after the Sichuan earthquake. This program is co-administered by several social work scholars mainly from China Youth University of Politics and China University of Political Science and Law. Our team has three kinds of members consisting of social work teachers as participatory action researchers, social work graduates as practitioners, and local community members as partners. The program is located in Han Wang Town, Mian Zhu County, Sichuan Province, an area which was almost completely destroyed in the earthquake. The objective of the program is to unify the community to develop people's livelihoods. The service focuses on disabled, isolated, individuals or people who come from dysfunctional families. After one

year of service, the program registered as Qing Hong Social Work Agency in the local county. Now the agency has facilitated two livelihood mutual help groups with ten members and is in the process of developing two co-operative organizations, one is a planting co-operative, another is a women's handcrafts workshop. Instead of presenting a complete picture of the program, this article focuses on two issues: how we have intervened in the lives of the local people and transformed their subject status from a habitual behaviour to a positive reflector on their livelihood model.

When we started our program in the winter of 2008, we did not rely on the evidence-based programs offered by other agencies. This does not mean that there is not a guiding theory. As researchers and designers of the program, we are familiar with the framework of sustainable livelihoods (Bebbington, 1999; DFID, 1999; Gwynne and Kay, 2004; Lont and Hospes, 2004), which is popular among international NGOs providing local development intervention programs. With the constraints imposed on the local community and NGOs by the government, we cannot apply an overseas livelihood framework into the local community directly. Indeed, an initial difficulty is how to open the door of the invisible enclosure. Therefore, the main concerns of our initiative are how can we enter the local community, how can we build mutual understanding relations with local institutions and residents, and how can we activate the agency hidden in local people?

Freire (1973) and Schön (1983) shed light on social work relations, the relation between service users and the practitioners, and relations between practitioners and researchers. These relationships should be based on dialogue and reflection, not on a hierarchical relationship. In the Qing Hong social work project, we encourage such a relationship of dialogue and reflection: no matter whether between social workers and local residents, or between frontline social workers and action researchers. By these multi-level dialogues, we gradually transform the relationship from an instrumental exchange relation into an equal discussion relation, and then into a mutual reflection relation. With the transformation of relationship, subjectivity changes gradually.

The Qing Hong social work team entered the community through the auspices of the local vocational school. When we arrived in the disaster area in the spring of 2009, the school provided us with field equipment and living quarters. As exchange conditions, we helped them forge links with external resources and conducted some training courses in occupational training. But we did not attempt to take over the operations of the school or become vocational teachers within this school. In our interactions with the principal of this school, we disclosed our intentions gradually and naturally so that our partners could understand and support our social work mission increasingly. With their consent, we, along with the school trainees, reached out to contact those residents who were vulnerable, isolated, and disabled. This was our first step in transforming the relationship with local collaborative partners.

Our second step was to transform the relationship with local residents. When they met us, firstly the residents asked what kind of help we would provide.

In an effort to restore their normal life habitus, they asked us to provide substantial materials and available resources. We were perceived as a kind of philanthropic institution or volunteers providing disaster relief. This was the habitual response of local residents to external interventions. While we were planning to provide funds to sustain them, our funds were not sufficient to restore their standards of living. We needed to transform this 'helping relationship' into a 'co-operative partnership'.

This course of action however, was not universally accepted by the frontline social workers. They had a different point of view. As frontline social workers had a closer relationship with local residents, they had more empathy for the residents' suffering and struggles, so they were keen to provide immediate financial assistance. On the contrary, we understood that simply providing money did not lead to capacity building and social transformation. By spending money in this way, we would further reinforce the unequal relationship between external helpers and local residents. The frontline social workers, however, who were enmeshed in the local life, focused on personal problems, and neglected to consider the relationship with and the subjectivity of residents.

If we want to transform the relationship between local residents and social workers, we must effect a third transformation in terms of the relationship between social workers and the action researchers. We extricated frontline workers from their immersion in local life and engaged them in structural dialogues and reflection. As action researchers within the team, we organized meetings with frontline workers to discuss our mission, goals, and strategies. How could we help local people? What kinds of effect would we have? What kind of impression would we make on local residents? By introducing these questions, the action researchers helped to clarify the objectives of our program:

The Qing Hong social work team is not merely funders, but more important also facilitators, enablers, and co-workers. We believe that local people have their own capacities, but need to be facilitated. We would like direct our funding towards community unity and indigenous development. The unification of community and improvements of living conditions are our two complementary objectives. If there is not participation, mobilization, organization, and education among local residents, we should prepare to accept the failure of our program. In this respect, we differ from other philanthropic agencies.

Initially, the frontline workers opposed the focus on community mobilization and education. They argued that the urgent hardships of local life must be addressed and that it was not the time to build co-operatives. There were heated debates in the meeting in which all participants had an equal say. But through extensive mutual dialogues and communications, all the members reached a consensus: we needed to address two priorities – relief of personal hardship and enhancement of community co-operation.

All the stages of these relationships were dynamic and transformative. They depended upon our dialogue between the local situation and professional ideas and knowledge, not a positivist research report. We created a structural dialogue relationship which means holding regular meetings to discuss practical ways to help with the process of intervention.

The agency and the structural habitus of everyday life

The above presentation of the transformative process case refers to another theoretical question in terms of the nature of practice and the nature of the subject. We will take Giddens' and Bourdieu's theory to elaborate this important question within the reflective practice model of social work. Ferguson (2009) and Garrett (2009) have introduced Giddens' and Bourdieu's theory into social work respectively, and have applied some specific ideas from Giddens and Bourdieu in social work. For example, the life politics concept of Giddens (cited in Ferguson, 2003) and reflexively fold inward to social workers' personal and collective habitus from Bourdieu (Garrett, 2007, 2009) have been discussed in social work. But there is still need to discuss the basic question of the nature of practice and subject.

Bourdieu and Giddens have made two pivotal contributions associated with our discussion: one is the description of everyday routine action; another is the reflexivity of the subject triggered by a particular method or situation. Bourdieu (1977) argues that everyday life consists of separate practical fields with different types of capital including material capital, cultural capital, and social capital etc., corresponding to three structures: (1) the objective social structure; (2) the subjective action structure; and (3) the symbolic structure. These three structures are interdependent but consistent with each other. Everyday life is an improvisational process based on habitus that refers to the subjective structural action model. This improvisational process is based on feelings rather than logical thinking, and it responds to a specific time and situation. However, Bourdieu (1977) gives no clear cues of how habitus was generated.

Giddens (1984) also mentions that there are schemes of ordinary action, which, like habitus, guide personal routines and social interaction structures. The scheme alone is the core of everyday life which is a structuring and structured process. Compared with Bourdieu (1977), Giddens is more concerned with the generation of structural schemes of everyday life. He absorbs Erikson's (1968) and Goffman's (1959) ideas and formulates his action schemes. He takes the concept of anxiety reduction instinct of Erikson, but puts this concept within the routinized interaction of everyday life, the concept from Goffman, and then integrates the two concepts to become his concept of action schemes (Giddens, 1984). Most of the action schemes are practical rather than theoretical in character, but they have more profound influences upon the generality of the social product. Only minor schemes are uplifted to discursive formulation as the rule of the strongly sanctioned (Giddens, 1984: 22).

Besides their focus on the processes of reproduction in everyday life, Bourdieu and Giddens also point out the strategy of self-autonomy of subject and the transformation of society. Giddens (1976) attributes social transformation to the reflexive construction effects of the social science. He contends that social science is a double hermeneutic process. The first stage is a reflexive induction from everyday life (a piecemeal means of acquiring common sense). The second stage is the formation of a systemic social science using expert rational processes (Giddens, 1976). Giddens (1990) further argues that social science gradually provides feedback to everyday life and becomes a new guiding principle, thus transforming social life. For Giddens, modernization is a reflexive praxis process: it is a disembedding process, which gradually breaks the constraints of time and space. Modernity also gives way to a second or reflexive quality which encourages people to become self-aware of social change, and self-guiding in life politics (Giddens, 1991).

Bourdieu and Waquant (1992) also argue that reflexivity is not merely a regressive exercise, undertaking some abstract guiding principles of life. Instead, reflection draws attention to one's unique life course and the relevant social field structure. Bourdieu calls this process an objectification of self. Through reflection, people become conscious of their life habitus and its relationship with the social structure. This consciousness raising allows them to break through the constraints of social structure. In this way, Bourdieu and Waquant (1992) point out more clearly the effects of reflection on the constraints of one's life. They reconstruct the relationship between structural transformation and personal liberation so as to transcend the interactive situational perspective.

From Bourdieu and Giddens, we know there are two practice theories: one, an everyday life theory; the other, an action theory. According to the former, everyday life is pre-reflective and habitual. According to the latter, action can become reflective and should be oriented towards future ideals. The key issue for action theory is how to disrupt habits and assume a personal action model to reflect the contextual structural constraints. Just by reflecting over their personal life history and questioning their overriding contexts, people can become aware of their behavioural model. Another French scholar of social movements, Alain Touraine (1988), contends that the transcendence of customized responses to everyday life relies not on reflections of one's past life but on the interpretation and questioning of 'histority'. 'Histority' refers to one's subjective understanding of the cultural pattern of social life and its development. He argues that sociologists must intervene and participate in this process of societal historical discussion by helping members of social movements to clarify and maintain the direction of development. With a vision of an ideal life in the future, people may be able to change this model and become active agents. The microcosmic change of the subject holds the promise of social structural transformation.

According to the above practice theory, in our Qing Hong program, the role of social workers and action researchers is to build a relationship and create a situation for reflecting their disrupted lifestyle by the earthquake and project a future life model with local people. The earthquake destroyed their normal life model and

resulted in stress and crisis, but it created a new chance too for local people to reflect their conventional life model. When we built a rapport with local people, they began to tell us of their critique of local government about their behaviour in the course of the earthquake and the relief of disaster. The local people became a new agent from accordant behaviourist to active reflector.

For transcending only criticizing local officials, we induced local people to build their own capacity and power. We created a participatory research group about their life model and livelihood strategies. In this group, we encouraged members to reflect their family role-taking, time-consuming, everyday activities arrangements, income sources and distribution, allowance of community resources, power relations within the community and with outside departments. In this group, members become active projectors and change agents of their family relations and livelihood. Furthermore, some members became co-operative partners and tried to build a co-operative livelihood program. Along with their enhancement of organizational capacity, they were capable of mastering interaction with local government, and acquired some support from local departments. This is a truly transformative process of real social relations and subjective agency, which differs from narrative construction shifts proposed by a postmodern approach (Chambon and Irving, 1994; Parton, 1994; Pease and Fook, 1999).

Transcending situational reflective action

The impact of macro-level factors on local practice

We have illustrated the transformative process of social relations and subjective agency by the means of dialogue and reflection on situational behaviours, but there is another issue we must address: how can we transcend the situational limits of reflective action? Even though Fook et al. (2000), Fook and Morley (2005) had mentioned this problem, they slipped more deeply into postmodernism and adopted perspectivism to see constraints of institution and structure. We shall introduce another different approach to deal with this problem.

From Marx, Mannheim to Kuhn, scholars have discussed the relationship between theory and practice. Marx (1845) firstly pointed out that the question whether objective truth could be attributed to human thinking was not a question of theory, but a question of practice. He also said that all mysteries which lead theory to mysticism found their rational solutions in human practice and in comprehension of their practice. Unlike Marx, who overwhelmingly emphasized the class position of intellectuals, Mannheim (1936) suggested that social scientists had social status and historical intentions. Still, the social sciences could transcend these limitations and become more objective and rational, when they became aware of their status and intentions. Kuhn's (1996) concept of paradigm begged the question of competing paradigms, but it also drew attention to the bases of the academic traditional community that generated paradigms for research. All the above discourses indicate that it is necessary to select a theoretical approach as the way of

comprehending whole or macro societal structure and institutions which constrain micro interaction in order to transcend situational limitation. Of course, theory is not absolute truth; its application is not universal, absolute, or permanent. Still, as Burawoy (1998) noted, theory could be reconstructed in dialogue with practice. He further showed the way of extending from the situational process: extending the observer to the participant, extending observations over space and time; extending from process to forces, and extending theory. We will not follow his procedures for the purpose of reconstruction theory, but inspired by his extended case method, we will show how we extended from situational interaction to consideration and alteration of macro institutional factors in our social work program.

In our Qing Hong Program, the action researchers play an important role to induce theoretical thoughts to practice. Taking a theoretical approach, we can analyze practice situations more deeply and systematically. This necessitates a role differentiation between the researcher and the practitioner, but this differentiation does not entail the detachment espoused by positivists. It simply assigns different tasks to the researcher and the practitioner: the researcher is more involved in theories, and the practitioner is more actively involved in interventions. Still both fruitfully interact through dialogue and mutual illumination. The interactions between researchers and practitioners can result in modification of theory and new directions in practice. Theory and practice do not have a hierarchical relationship. They are relations of dialectical development.

The following will illustrate this relationship between theory and practice. In the initial stages of our investigation, a tragic event occurred: the suicide of the director of the propaganda department of the local government, the spokesperson for the earthquake relief. One of our action researchers in the working team hoped that this event would trigger a discussion about emotional problems people faced in disaster zones. He recommended that this could be the focus of our community investigation. He also recommended that Qing Hong should organize photograph exhibitions of community life of the disaster zone in universities in Beijing, the capital of China, to challenge the dominant presentation by mainstream media controlled by the government. The director of our program criticized this idea as using the residents' suffering as a means of eliciting attention. He argued that we should confine our activities to the community. The frontline workers argued that the life of local people was full of hope and strength rather than difficulties and sufferings. They insisted that we should not neglect the support of the local government and did not have the right to criticize it. They contended that such critique would undermine our commitment to partnership, equality, and respect with the local government.

Actually, this dispute illuminates the difference between reflective science and postmodernism. Reflective science argues that the interpretation of micro situational events should be linked with macro institutional factors and reflects their vertical relation between macro and micro levels (Burawoy, 1998). In contrast, interpretivists or postmodernists seek to interpret the local world from an

indigenous perspective, and understand actions and meanings within this context. The anecdote here is used to pose questions of how to reflect the vertical impact of the government system and policy strategically without impairing partnership relations with the local department. Frankly, our program does not work out an effective way.

When we built a mutual help group and finished our participatory training course, we faced making another decision: should we begin family support groups and mutual aid initiatives, thereby to facilitate community organizations, or should we establish a management committee and entrust the responsibility of approving and managing funding to the committee? One of the action researchers maintained that we should begin with family support and then establish a management committee, but the director of our project was in favour of setting up a management committee first and giving them the authority to decide to proceed. He persisted that we should trust the capacity and responsibilities of our service users, and should transfer autonomy to their committee. But who would become the leader of the committee, and how to approach candidates? The answer was unclear.

This disagreement represents another disjunction between different theoretical points of view on power, rights, and responsibilities. Funding the family livelihood program firstly means that the Qing Hong agency holds power to influence family livelihood. Establishing a management committee first means delegating power to a new organization that does not emerge as the result of community election and capacity-building, but selected by Qing Hong social workers. No matter that that kind of conduct means unequal power relations. The former assumes the professional power by Qing Hong agency and professionals who have the expertise to decide the candidates from the assisted, the latter supports the positional power assumed by the management committee who are not elected but selected by Qing Hong agency. This theoretical clarification of power relations demonstrates that in social work practice, power relations are not only produced by a discipline or a profession, but also by positions and resources within structural relations. These are two different kinds of power: the former is Foucauldian power perception (Foucault, 1980; Healy, 1999); the latter is Giddens' and Bourdieu's power perception. We cannot substitute one power perception with another, but we understand about the ways in which these two different kinds of power influence our practice simultaneously.

Conclusion

As an alternative to rational technical practice, reflective practice was posed by Freire (1973) and Schön (1983, 1987). It has developed into a new stage so as to integrate an inductive theory building with deductive theory testing in practice (Sheppard et al., 2000), context-free knowledge with situational knowledge into expertise (Dreyfus and Dreyfus, 1986; Eraut, 1994). Fook and her colleagues (2000) also introduced the expertise theory of Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1986) and

Eraut (1994) into social work and proposed a contextual critical reflector as the skilled expert of connecting four kinds of knowledge (substantive, procedural, cultural and perceptual, and manual knowledge). But they omitted the discussion of the subjectivity of the actor and the vertical constraints of macro institutional factors. This article, based on our experience of the Qing Hong program, brings the practice theory of Bourdieu and Giddens into our discussion on the subjectivity of the actor. No matter, community residents, or frontline practitioners, are susceptible to be the routinized actor and the responsive actor embedded within field structure. It needs structural dialogue with a theoretical researcher to reflect on their subjectivity and constraint conditions. By the way, community residents and practitioners can become active reflective actors and prospective actors.

At the next step, we bring the extended case method of Burawoy (1998) into reflective practice as a method to extend situation dialogue to macro institutional factors and different kinds of power relations in our program. We contend that this elaboration of the reflective practice model can take account of the theory of macro variables and power relations in flexible and variable direct practice whilst avoiding entrapment in relativism or perspectivism. We believe that this consideration can be more persuasive for dealing with the relation between theory and practice than the evidence-based practice model and the existing reflective practice model.

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